

Georgia's Agricultural Heritage and the National Register

Resources associated with historic agriculture are recognized nationally as both common and endangered. This duality has led to uncertainty in assessing their significance and eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. While agriculture obviously played an important role in our nation's history, many agency personnel and consultants have difficulty determining which properties sufficiently embody this history for purposes of National Register evaluation. Similarly, agricultural architecture is neither well understood nor well described. It is difficult to evaluate a historic "barn" without knowing what type of barn it is and the history of barns in that state or region. In a workshop hosted by the National Transportation Research Board three years ago, participants repeatedly noted the need for historic contexts as the framework for making eligibility decisions (see pp. 45-46).

For the past two years, the state of Georgia has worked to develop a context for its historic agriculture using funding provided by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), the Federal Highway Administration (FHwA) and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The result has been a collaborative effort between the SHPO, GDOT, FHwA, and the project's consultant, New South Associates. The final product is the publication *Tilling the Earth: Georgia's Historic Agricultural Heritage—A Context*, which is intended for use by state and federal government

agencies, regional development centers, private historical and preservation organizations, planning and historic preservation consultants, and others. The document assists the user in understanding the state's agrarian past; accurately identifying and recording its physical vestiges including architecture, landscape and archeological remains; and evaluating significance within the framework of a state and regional context.

Georgia's origins and historic development are closely tied to agriculture. Its large geographical size, along with its environmental and cultural diversity, produced a complex agricultural mosaic on the land. In order to understand this mixture, the context defined five historical time periods related to the predominant agricultural activities, along with six geographic regions related to topography, climate, and soils. The identified regions from northwest to southeast are Ridge and Valley, Mountains, Piedmont, Upper Coastal Plain, Central Coastal Plain, and Coast and Sea Islands. Other variables resulting in the diversity of agricultural forms in the state included crops and ethnicity.

Corn shucking on the London farm, Lumpkin County, Georgia, c. 1890. These community gatherings often rotated from farm to farm. Photo courtesy Georgia Department of Archives and History.



In order to supplement the documentary and archival research, the project's architectural historian traveled throughout Georgia visiting areas where a sampling of certain types of agricultural properties were likely to be found. This reconnaissance was used, along with information from existing National Register and survey files and the state's Centennial Farms program, to prepare a descriptive guide to the diverse structures and landscapes associated with Georgia agriculture. The descriptions establish preliminary baseline data for future researchers, as well as a point of reference for comparative purposes.

Barns were by far the most common outbuildings encountered in Georgia, but smokehouses, chicken coops, garages, corncribs, and well houses were also well represented in most regions. Farms in the deep South tended to have less need for large outbuildings due to the mild climate. According to recent statewide building survey files, 28% of all properties identified as farms have no outbuildings, 61% have between one and five outbuildings, 10% have between six and ten, and only 1.3% have more than ten. Past studies, including archeological research, have shown a distinct bias in favor of examining plantations or larger farms. This is changing with the increased recognition of rural landscapes as National Register districts encompassing many smaller entities.

The agricultural context gives a practical methodology for applying the National Register "Criteria for Evaluation" to Georgia's historic agrarian resources. It provides a filter for determining whether a specific property meets the tests for significance (associative value) and integrity (authenticity of the physical characteristics from which the property obtains its significance). The four National Register criteria (A, B, C, and D) and the seven aspects of integrity (location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association) are specifically applied to Georgia's agricultural properties. The study then defines certain elements that must be present in one of several possible combinations in order for the resource to be eligible for the National Register.

The most difficult task was to describe a set of eligibility requirements that consider the characteristics unique to the Georgia agricultural landscape, and yet are uncomplicated and flexible

enough to be applied broadly throughout this diverse state. Questions such as "how many outbuildings need to remain intact?" do not have simple answers. Instead, the context considers the entire combination of elements such as the main farmhouse, the agricultural outbuildings, archeological deposits, and the related landscape. The links between the physical remains and their historical associations are also crucial. Working farms are dynamic entities that have made technological changes in order to survive. The study considers how much change and what type of change could adversely impact integrity.

The agricultural context for Georgia was completed at a critical time in the state's history. Historic farms are threatened by several factors. Fewer people than ever are engaged in farming. The economics of farming, involving larger machines and production facilities, have increased farm size. Older buildings are becoming obsolete, and are often left to decay. On smaller farms, where money is scarce, rehabilitation of older structures may be a low priority. Barns are sometimes dismantled for their lumber. Near urban areas, increasing real estate values are a factor in the loss of historic farmsteads to subdivision development and other projects. The widening of rural roads may threaten archeological sites, as well as above-ground farm structures.

While some change is inevitable, the gradual disappearance of historic agricultural resources leaves the state with fewer visible reminders of a significant part of its past. For these reasons, it is more important than ever that agrarian properties be evaluated for their eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Study and documentation may help create an appreciation of the intrinsic value of these resources, as well as a better understanding of their role in Georgia's history.

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The agricultural context will be posted on the Georgia SHPO web site <www.gashpo.org>.